

Chapter 2

Direct Strategies for Dealing with Language

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt is . . . a raid on the inarticulate.

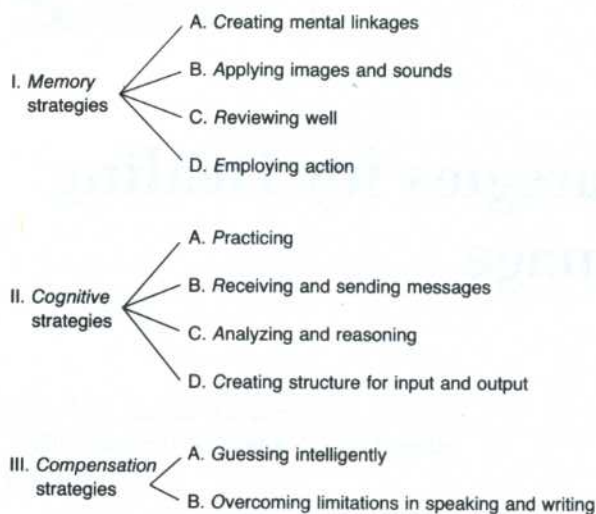
T. S. ELIOT

PREVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are direct strategies?
2. How do they differ from indirect strategies?
3. Why are direct strategies important for language learning?
4. What are the three groups of direct strategies?

INTRODUCTION TO DIRECT STRATEGIES

Language learning strategies that directly involve the target language are called *direct strategies*. All direct strategies require mental processing of the language, but the three groups of direct strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensation) do this processing differently and for different purposes. *Memory strategies*, such as grouping or using imagery, have a highly specific function: helping students store and retrieve new information. *Cognitive strategies*, such as summarizing or reasoning deductively, enable learners to understand and produce new language by many different means. *Compensation strategies*, like guessing or using synonyms, allow learners to use the language despite their often large gaps in knowledge. Figure 2.1 highlights these three groups of direct strategies.



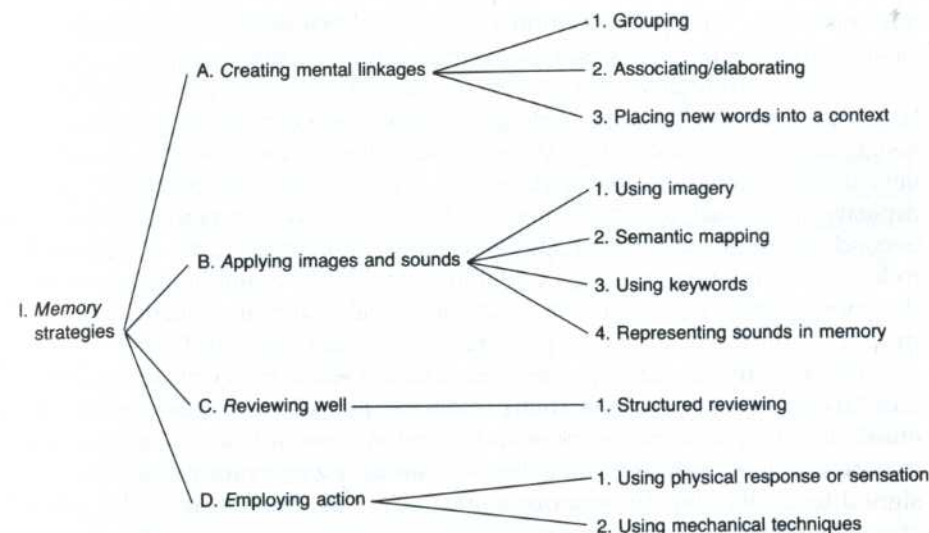
Memory Aids: CARE, PRAC, GO

Figure 2.1 Diagram of the Direct Strategies: Overview. (Source: Original.)

MEMORY STRATEGIES

Memory strategies, sometimes called mnemonics, have been used for thousands of years. For example, orators in ancient times could remember a long speech by linking different parts of the speech with different rooms of a house or temple, and then "taking a walk" from room to room [1]. Before literacy became widespread, people used memory strategies to remember practical information about farming, weather, or when they were born. After literacy became commonplace, people forgot their previous reliance on memory strategies and disparaged those techniques as "gimmicks." Now memory strategies are regaining their prestige as powerful mental tools. The mind can store some 100 trillion bits of information, but only part of that potential can be used unless memory strategies come to the aid of the learner.

Memory strategies fall into four sets: Creating Mental Linkages, Applying Images and Sounds, Reviewing Well, and Employing Actions (see Figure 2.2). The first letters of each of these strategy sets spell CARE, an acronym that is itself a memory aid: "Take CARE of your memory and your memory will take CARE of you!" Memory strategies are clearly more effective when the learner simultaneously uses metacognitive strategies, like paying attention, and affective strategies, like reducing anxiety through deep breathing.



Memory Aid: CARE

"Take CARE of your memory, and
your memory will take CARE of you!"

*The memory strengthens as you lay burdens upon it,
and becomes trustworthy as you trust it.*

Thomas de Quinicy

Figure 2.2 Diagram of the Memory Strategies. (Source: Original.)

Memory strategies reflect very simple principles, such as arranging things in order, making associations, and reviewing [2]. These principles all involve *meaning*. For the purpose of learning a new language, the arrangement and associations must be personally meaningful to the learner, and the material to be reviewed must have significance [3].

Though some teachers think vocabulary learning is easy, language learners have a serious problem remembering the large amounts of vocabulary necessary to achieve fluency. "Vocabulary is by far the most sizeable and unmanageable component in the learning of any language, whether a foreign or one's mother tongue" because of "tens of thousands of different meanings," according to Lord [4]. Memory strategies help language learners to cope with this difficulty. They enable learners to store verbal material and then retrieve it when needed for communication. In addition, the memory strategy of structured reviewing helps move information from the "fact level" to the "skill level," where knowledge is more procedural and

automatic [5]. When information has reached the skill level, it is more easily retrieved and less easily lost after a period of disuse [6].

Memory strategies often involve pairing different types of material. In language learning, it is possible to give verbal labels to pictures, or to create visual images of words or phrases. Linking the verbal with the visual is very useful to language learning for four reasons. First, the mind's storage capacity for visual information exceeds its capacity for verbal material. Second, the most efficiently packaged chunks of information are transferred to long-term memory through visual images. Third, visual images may be the most potent device to aid recall of verbal material. Fourth, a large proportion of learners have a preference for visual learning [7].

While many language learners benefit from visual imagery, others have aural (sound-oriented), kinesthetic (motion-oriented) or tactile (touch-oriented) learning style preferences and therefore benefit from linking verbal material with sound, motion or touch. Certain memory strategies are designed to do this [8]. In memory strategies, as in other kinds of learning strategies, "different strokes for different folks" should be the cardinal rule.

Although memory strategies can be powerful contributors to language learning, some research shows that language students rarely report using these strategies [9]. It might be that students simply do not use memory strategies very much, especially beyond elementary levels of language learning. However, an alternative explanation might be that they are unaware of how often they actually *do* employ memory strategies. Below are the definitions of each memory strategy, as clustered into appropriate strategy sets.

Creating Mental Linkages

In this set are three strategies that form the cornerstone for the rest of the memory strategies: grouping, associating/elaborating, and using context.

1. Grouping

Classifying or reclassifying language material into meaningful units, either mentally or in writing, to make the material easier to remember by reducing the number of discrete elements. Groups can be based on type of word (e.g., all nouns or verbs), topic (e.g., words about weather), practical function (e.g., terms for things that make a car work), linguistic function (e.g., apology, request, demand), similarity (e.g., warm, hot, tepid, tropical), dissimilarity or opposition (e.g., friendly/unfriendly), the way one feels about something (e.g., like, dislike), and so on. The power of this strategy may be enhanced by labeling the groups, using acronyms to remember the groups, or using different colors to represent different groups.

2. Associating/Elaborating

Relating new language information to concepts already in memory, or relating one piece of information to another, to create associations in memory. These associations can be simple or complex, mundane or strange, but they must be meaningful to the learner. Associations can be between two things, such as bread and butter, or they can be in the form of a multipart "development," such as school-book-paper-tree-country-earth [10]. They can also be part of a network, such as a semantic map (see below).

3. Placing New Words into a Context

Placing a word or phrase in a meaningful sentence, conversation, or story in order to remember it. This strategy involves a form of associating/elaborating, in which the new information is linked with a context. This strategy is not the same as guessing intelligently, a set of compensation strategies (described later) which involve using all possible clues, including the context, to guess the meaning.

Applying Images and Sounds

Four strategies are included here: using imagery, using keywords, semantic mapping, and representing sounds in memory. These all involve remembering by means of visual images or sounds.

1. Using Imagery

Relating new language information to concepts in memory by means of meaningful visual imagery, either in the mind or in an actual drawing. The image can be a picture of an object, a set of locations for remembering a sequence of words or expressions, or a mental representation of the letters of a word. This strategy can be used to remember abstract words by associating such words with a visual symbol or a picture of a concrete object.

2. Semantic Mapping [11]

Making an arrangement of words into a picture, which has a key concept at the center or at the top, and related words and concepts linked with the key concept by means of lines or arrows. This strategy involves meaningful imagery, grouping, and associations; it visually shows how certain groups of words relate to each other.

3. Using Keywords [12]

Remembering a new word by using auditory and visual links. The first step is to identify a familiar word in one's own language that sounds like the new word—this is the "auditory link." The second step is to generate

an image of some relationship between the new word and a familiar one—this is the “visual link.” Both links must be meaningful to the learner. For example, to learn the new French word *potage* (soup), the English speaker associates it with a pot and then pictures a pot full of *potage*. To use a keyword to remember something abstract, such as a name, associate it with a picture of something concrete that sounds like the new word. For example, Minnesota can be remembered by the image of a *mini soda* [13].

4. Representing Sounds in Memory

Remembering new language information according to its sound. This is a broad strategy that can use any number of techniques, all of which create a meaningful, sound-based association between the new material and already known material. For instance, you can (a) link a target language word with any other word (in any language) that sounds like the target language word, such as Russian *brat* [брат] (brother) and English *brat* (annoying person), (b) use phonetic spelling and/or accent marks, or (c) use rhymes to remember a word.

Reviewing Well

This category contains just one strategy, structured reviewing. Looking at new target language information once is not enough; it must be reviewed in order to be remembered.

1. Structured Reviewing [14]

Reviewing in carefully spaced intervals, at first close together and then more widely spaced apart. This strategy might start, for example, with a review 10 minutes after the initial learning, then 20 minutes later, an hour or two later, a day later, 2 days later, a week later, and so on. This is sometimes called “spiraling,” because the learner keeps spiraling back to what has already been learned at the same time that he or she is learning new information. The goal is “overlearning”—that is, being so familiar with the information that it becomes natural and automatic.

Employing Action

The two strategies in this set, using physical response or sensation and using mechanical tricks, both involve some kind of meaningful movement or action. These strategies will appeal to learners who enjoy the kinesthetic or tactile modes of learning.

1. Using Physical Response or Sensation [15]

Physically acting out a new expression (e.g., going to the door), or *meaningfully relating a new expression to a physical feeling or sensation* (e.g., warmth).

2. Using Mechanical Techniques

Using creative but tangible techniques, especially involving moving or changing something which is concrete, in order to remember new target language information. Examples are writing words on cards and moving cards from one stack to another when a word is learned, and putting different types of material in separate sections of a language learning notebook.

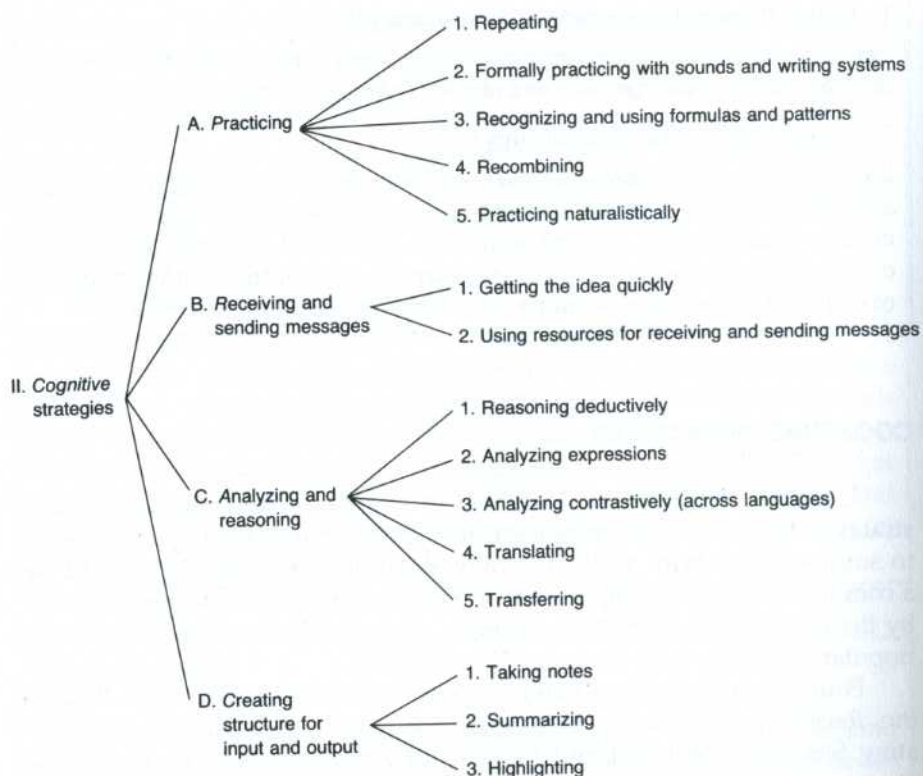
COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

Cognitive strategies are essential in learning a new language. Such strategies are a varied lot, ranging from repeating to analyzing expressions to summarizing. With all their variety, cognitive strategies are unified by a common function: manipulation or transformation of the target language by the learner [16]. Cognitive strategies are typically found to be the most popular strategies with language learners [17].

Four sets of cognitive strategies exist, as shown in Figure 2.3: Practicing, Receiving and Sending Messages, Analyzing and Reasoning, and Creating Structure for Input and Output. The first letters of each of these strategy sets combine to form the acronym PRAC, because “Cognitive strategies are PRACTical for language learning.”

Strategies for practicing are among the most important cognitive strategies. Language learners do not always realize how essential practice is. During class, potential practice opportunities are often missed because one person recites while the others sit idle. Even when small group activities increase the amount of classroom practice, still more practice is usually needed to reach acceptable proficiency, a goal which requires hundreds or even thousands of hours of practice, depending on the difficulty of the language and other factors [18]. Given these facts, the practicing strategies—including repeating, formally practicing with sounds and writing systems, recognizing and using formulas and patterns, recombining, and practicing naturalistically—take on special value. Research has underscored the importance of naturalistic practice at all levels of language learning [19].

Strategies for receiving and sending messages are necessary tools. One such strategy, known as getting the idea quickly, helps learners locate the main idea through skimming or the key points of interest through scanning. This strategy implies that it is not necessary for learners to focus on every single word. Another strategy in this group, using resources, is useful for



Memory Aid: PRAC

"Cognitive strategies are PRAC-tical for language learning."

Wild and whirling words!
William Shakespeare

Figure 2.3 Diagram of the Cognitive Strategies. (Source: Original.)

both comprehension and production. It helps learners take advantage of a variety of resources, print or nonprint, to understand and produce messages in the new language.

Analyzing and reasoning strategies are commonly used by language learners. Many learners, especially adults [20], tend to "reason out" the new language. They construct a formal model in their minds based on analysis and comparison, create general rules, and revise those rules when new information is available. This process is extremely valuable. However, sometimes students make mistakes by unquestioningly generalizing the

rules they've learned or transferring expressions from one language to another, typically from the mother tongue to the new language. Such mistakes characterize the "interlanguage," a hybrid form of language that lies somewhere between the native language and the target language [21]. Inappropriate use of literal translation also contributes to the interlanguage [22]. Interlanguage is a predictable, normal phase of language learning, but some language learners fail to leave that phase because they misuse or overuse some of the analyzing and reasoning strategies.

Language learners often feel besieged by "whirling words" from radio and TV programs, films, lectures, stories, articles, and conversations. To understand better, learners need to structure all this input into manageable chunks by using strategies such as taking notes, summarizing, and highlighting. Such structure-generating strategies are also helpful in preparing to use the language for speaking and writing.

Following are the definitions of important cognitive strategies.

Practicing

Of the five practicing strategies, probably the most significant one is practicing naturalistically.

1. Repeating

Saying or doing something over and over: listening to something several times; rehearsing; imitating a native speaker.

2. Formally Practicing with Sounds and Writing Systems

Practicing sounds (pronunciation, intonation, register, etc.) in a variety of ways, but not yet in naturalistic communicative practice; or practicing the new writing system of the target language.

3. Recognizing and Using Formulas and Patterns

Being aware of and/or using routine formulas (single, unanalyzed units), such as "Hello, how are you?"; and unanalyzed patterns (which have at least one slot to be filled), such as, "It's time to _____."

4. Recombining

Combining known elements in new ways to produce a longer sequence, as in linking one phrase with another in a whole sentence.

5. Practicing Naturalistically

Practicing the new language in natural, realistic settings, as in participating in a conversation, reading a book or article, listening to a lecture, or writing a letter in the new language.

Receiving and Sending Messages

Two strategies for receiving and sending messages are (a) getting the idea quickly and (b) using resources for receiving and sending messages. The former uses two specific techniques for extracting ideas, while the latter involves using a variety of resources for understanding or producing meaning.

1. Getting the Idea Quickly

Using skimming to determine the main ideas or scanning to find specific details of interest. This strategy helps learners understand rapidly what they hear or read in the new language. Preview questions often assist.

2. Using Resources for Receiving and Sending Messages

Using print or nonprint resources to understand incoming messages or produce outgoing messages.

Analyzing and Reasoning

This set of five strategies concerns logical analysis and reasoning as applied to various target language skills. Often learners can use these strategies to understand the meaning of a new expression or to create a new expression.

1. Reasoning Deductively

Using general rules and applying them to new target language situations. This is a top-down strategy leading from general to specific.

2. Analyzing Expressions

Determining the meaning of a new expression by breaking it down into parts; using the meanings of various parts to understand the meaning of the whole expression.

3. Analyzing Contrastively

Comparing elements (sounds, vocabulary, grammar) of the new language with elements of one's own language to determine similarities and differences.

4. Translating

Converting a target language expression into the native language (at various levels, from words and phrases all the way up to whole texts); or converting the native language into the target language; using one language as the basis for understanding or producing another.

5. Transferring

Directly applying knowledge of words, concepts, or structures from one language to another in order to understand or produce an expression in the new language.

Creating Structure for Input and Output

The following three strategies are ways to create structure, which is necessary for both comprehension and production in the new language.

1. Taking Notes

Writing down the main idea or specific points. This strategy can involve raw notes, or it can comprise a more systematic form of note-taking such as the shopping-list format, the T-formation, the semantic map, or the standard outline form.

2. Summarizing

Making a summary or abstract of a longer passage.

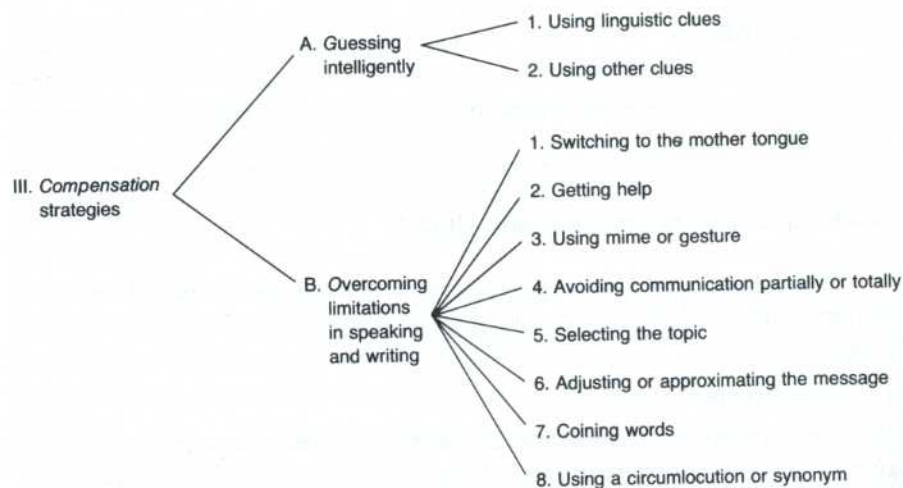
3. Highlighting

Using a variety of emphasis techniques (such as underlining, starring, or color-coding) to focus on important information in a passage.

COMPENSATION STRATEGIES

Compensation strategies enable learners to use the new language for either comprehension or production despite limitations in knowledge. Compensation strategies are intended to make up for an inadequate repertoire of grammar and, especially, of vocabulary. Ten compensation strategies exist, clustered into two sets: Guessing Intelligently in Listening and Reading, and Overcoming Limitations in Speaking and Writing (see Figure 2.4). These two sets can be remembered by the acronym GO, since "Language learners can GO far with compensation strategies."

Guessing strategies, sometimes called "inferencing," involve using a wide variety of clues—linguistic and nonlinguistic—to guess the meaning when the learner does not know all the words [23]. Good language learners, when confronted with unknown expressions, make educated guesses. On the other hand, less adept language learners often panic, tune out, or grab the dog-eared dictionary and try to look up every unfamiliar word—harmful responses which impede progress toward proficiency.



Memory Aid: GO

"Language learners can GO far with compensation strategies."

Necessity is the mother of invention.
16th-century proverb

Figure 2.4 Diagram of the Compensation Strategies. (Source: Original.)

Beginners are not the only ones who employ guessing. Advanced learners and even native speakers use guessing when they haven't heard something well enough, when they don't know a new word, or when the meaning is hidden between the lines. Guessing is actually just a special case of the way people typically process new information—that is, interpreting the data by using the immediate context and their own life experience. "Meaning is in fact created by the receiver in light of the experience which [s]he already possesses," said MacBride [24]. It is this experience which provides the source of many intelligent guesses for both language experts and novices.

Compensation occurs not just in understanding the new language but also in producing it. Compensation strategies allow learners to produce spoken or written expression in the new language without complete knowledge. Researchers have typically paid attention only to compensation strategies for speaking [25]. It is true that certain compensation strategies, like using mime or gestures, are used in speaking. However, other compensation strategies—adjusting or approximating the message, coining words, using a circumlocution or synonym, or selecting the topic—can be used in informal writing as well as in speaking.

Many compensation strategies for production are used to compensate for a lack of appropriate vocabulary, but these strategies can also be used to make up for a lack of grammatical knowledge. For instance, if learners do not know how to express the subjunctive form of a verb, they might use a different form to get the message across.

Just as advanced learners and native speakers occasionally use guessing to help them understand, they sometimes use compensation strategies when experiencing a temporary breakdown in speaking or writing performance. Less proficient language learners need these compensatory production strategies even more, because they run into knowledge roadblocks more often than do individuals who are skilled in the language.

Compensation strategies for production help learners to keep on using the language, thus obtaining more practice. In addition, some of these strategies, such as adjusting or approximating the message, help learners become more fluent in what they already know. Still other compensation strategies, like getting help and coining words, may lead learners to gain new information about what is appropriate or permissible in the target language [26]. Learners skilled in such strategies sometimes communicate better than learners who know many more target language words and structures.

Here are definitions of some key compensation strategies.

Guessing Intelligently in Listening and Reading

The two strategies which contribute to guessing intelligently refer to two different kinds of clues: linguistic and nonlinguistic [27].

1. Using Linguistic Clues

Seeking and using language-based clues in order to guess the meaning of what is heard or read in the target language, in the absence of complete knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, or other target language elements. Language-based clues may come from aspects of the target language that the learner already knows, from the learners' own language, or from another language. For instance, if the learner does not know the expression *association sans but lucratif* ("nonprofit association," in French), previous knowledge of certain words in English (*association*, *lucrative*) and French (*sans* = without) would give clues to the meaning of the unknown word, *but* (aim, goal), and of the whole expression.

2. Using Other Clues

Seeking and using clues that are not language-based in order to guess the meaning of what is heard or read in the target language, in the absence of complete knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, or other target language elements. Nonlanguage clues may come from a wide variety of sources:

topic, or "general world knowledge." For example, if the learner does not know what is meant by the words *vends* or *à vendre* in the French newspaper, noticing that these words are used in the context of classified ads, and that they are followed by a list of items and prices, provides clues suggesting that these terms probably refer to selling.

Overcoming Limitations in Speaking and Writing

Eight strategies are used for overcoming limitations in speaking and writing. Some of these are dedicated solely to speaking, but some can be used for writing, as well.

1. Switching to the Mother Tongue

Using the mother tongue for an expression without translating it, as in *Ich bin eine girl*. This strategy may also include adding word endings from the new language onto words from the mother tongue.

2. Getting Help

Asking someone for help by hesitating or explicitly asking for the person to provide the missing expression in the target language.

3. Using Mime or Gesture

Using physical motion, such as mime or gesture, in place of an expression to indicate the meaning.

4. Avoiding Communication Partially or Totally

Partially or totally avoiding communication when difficulties are anticipated. This strategy may involve avoiding communication in general, avoiding certain topics, avoiding specific expressions, or abandoning communication in mid-utterance.

5. Selecting the Topic

Choosing the topic of conversation in order to direct the communication to one's own interests and make sure the topic is one in which the learner has sufficient vocabulary and grammar to converse.

6. Adjusting or Approximating the Message

Altering the message by omitting some items of information, making ideas simpler or less precise, or saying something slightly different that means almost the same thing, such as saying *pencil* for *pen*.

7. Coining Words

Making up new words to communicate the desired idea, such as *paper-holder* for *notebook*.

8. Using a Circumlocution or Synonym

Getting the meaning across by describing the concept (circumlocution) or using a word that means the same thing (synonym); for example, "what you use to wash dishes with" as a description for *dishrag*.

SUMMARY

This chapter has explained direct strategies, which involve use of the new language, and has described these groups of direct strategies: memory, cognitive, and compensation. Definitions of a variety of specific strategies in each group were also given. In the next chapter, these strategies will be applied to the four language skills.

ACTIVITIES FOR READERS

Activity 2.1. Check Your Attitudes Toward Memory Strategies

Consider your attitudes toward memory strategies. Were you brought up to believe that memory strategies are just gimmicks or tricks that are not used by serious people? Or have you generally believed that memory strategies are valuable tools for improving mental power? Explain how your attitude toward memory strategies has or has not changed through reading this chapter.

List at least eight new ideas about memory strategies you gained from this chapter. Put one star beside each of the ideas which might benefit you personally. Put two stars beside each of those which might help your students as well.

Activity 2.2. Examine Memory Strategies in Different Settings

Brainstorm the ways that memory strategies might be used in two different settings: the language classroom and a naturalistic language setting outside of the classroom (for example, a local cultural event where the language is used). Be as specific as possible.

Activity 2.3. Think About Language Loss

Have you or your students experienced loss of language skills through nonuse? If so, under what circumstances? What kinds of memory strategies might have helped prevent this loss?

